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Second Land Armies and Excess Combatant Commands

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On August 12, 2010 Secretary of Defense Robert Gates [announced](#) he had ordered a thorough force structure review of the Marine Corps to determine what an expeditionary force in readiness should look like in the 21st century, echoing the intermittent characterization of the Marine Corps as a "second land army." Three days prior, Gates [announced](#) U.S. Joint Forces Command, established to foster joint doctrine and conduct joint training and experimentation, would close, asserting the "U.S. military has largely embraced jointness as a matter of culture and practice" and the need for an entirely separate four star command no longer existed. Together, the two steps constitute major components of the secretary's now well-publicized initiative to enhance efficiency across the Department of Defense. The secretary's efforts are laudable, but exploring opportunities within legacy service and combatant command structures will achieve the minimum. Instead of prompting the world's premier strike force to justify itself or closing a command tasked with cultivating a joint force, the secretary should be exploring how the American military can emulate the Marine Corps and become a truly global joint force.

Defense Budget Pressures and Global Uncertainty

Over the preceding decade, the defense budget [has increased tremendously](#) and continued growth is inconceivable. To preempt inevitable calls for reduced defense spending, Secretary Gates has proposed cutting excess departmental overhead (approximately \$100 billion) and shifting those savings to the service procurement accounts for the next five fiscal years.

Unfortunately, any success the initiative achieves would be diminished by failing to undertake a corresponding reform of prevailing bureaucratic arrangements. The authority over resource allocation held by the military departments come at the expense of combatant commands tasked with executing missions. The allocations of resources is not purposefully divergent from mission priorities, but merely a consequence of [Title X](#) obligations to man, equip, and train. [Goldwater-Nichols](#) has fostered jointness, but the force is not genuinely joint yet.

In short, this divergence complicates any attempt at efficiency and the broader attempt to craft a joint force armed with the capabilities necessary for security challenges on the horizon.

The byword of the future joint operating environment is uncertainty. The 2009 Department of Defense [Capstone Concept for Joint Operations](#), the chairman's "vision for how the joint force circa 2016-2028 will operate, states it more succinctly, "the future operating environment will be characterized by *uncertainty, complexity, rapid change, and persistent conflict*. [Emphasis in the original]".

In such an environment, the American joint force will be designed, organized, equipped, and trained to execute one or more of four broad types of activities: combat, security, engagement, and relief and reconstruction. The Capstone Concept states the scale of warfare may range from limited strikes or raids to prolonged theater or multi-theater campaigns, and, indeed, the history of recent American military actions, 1991 to present, has been bookended by massive troop commitments to southwestern Asia as well as numerous smaller scale contingencies in the Caribbean, the Balkans, east Africa, and the western Pacific. However, the Capstone Concept acknowledges the U.S. military is "imbalanced," in that codified doctrine exists only for combat, while doctrine and capabilities for the other activities are "less robust." More pointedly, of all governmental entities, only the military can conduct combat operations.

According to the [2010 Joint Operating Environment](#) (2010 JOE), two principal combat scenarios emerge – major war with a peer competitor / alliance of hostile states or persistent irregular war against insurgent forces around the world. Possessing the ability to prevent war as well as the capabilities for all conceivable contingencies would be optimal, but attempting to do so globally and simultaneously would be impractical as national resources are limited. Accordingly, the JOE 2010 emphasizes the importance of access and logistics – regardless of the scenario, America cannot project power if access is contested and the joint force cannot be sustained if logistics are subject to disruption.

Adversaries readily recognize the U.S. military's challenges on these fronts and have adopted anti-access and area denial tactics. While the JOE 2010 catalogues a number of countries or transnational entities that could emerge as adversaries, its analysis of prevailing trends concludes the likeliest locales will be megacities along the littorals within countries navigating complicated political and economic transitions.

Returning to the Capstone Concept, the ideal joint force "maximize[s] complementar[ity]" and reflects the ability and willingness to compare alternative component missions and mixes "solely from the perspective of combined effectiveness, *unhampered by Service parochialism*. [emphasis added]"¹

Unfortunately service parochialism is the reality. While declining budgets will invariably spur inter-service competition and some efficiencies, history shows defense budget allocations among

¹ Ironically, the Capstone Concept also asserts the can be mitigated by requiring forces to transition among those activities routinely in training and exercises, and by improving the modularization of enabling capabilities such as logistics to facilitate rapid mission transitions without permanent organizational reconfiguration. When the 2000s began, the Army was exploring a shift to brigade-based force structure to become more expeditionary, implemented "modularity" with only enormous difficulty, and is now closing the decade contemplating a return to a division-based structure.

the three military departments are virtually immune to rising and declining budgets. According to the FY2007 Future Years Defense Program, the service shares of the defense budget have essentially static, deviating less than 1.8 percent, for the period from 1973 to 2013. ([LINK](#), PDF page 4) (See [data](#) and [chart](#) per the FY2011 President's Budget)

U.S. Marine Corps as Template

Each of the services perform one or more of the functions expected of the joint force (maneuver, fires, intelligence, command and control, force protection, logistics), but only one has historically demonstrated doctrinal versatility and possesses the varied capabilities in line with anticipated challenges – the United States Marine Corps.

The [2010 Marine Corps Operating Concepts](#) identifies the Corps's core missions as 1) assuring littoral access (whether it is engagement, crisis response, or power projection) and 2) waging “small wars”, which is defined as operations undertaken under executive authority, where military force is applied—usually in combination with the other elements of power—in the internal or external affairs of another state whose government is unwilling or incapable of safeguarding American interests there.

Unlike the Army, Navy, or Air Force, the Marine Corps is not optimized for a single battlespace – land, sea, or air, respectively. Instead, the Marine Corps prides itself on being optimized for the intersection of these battlespaces. Expecting the unexpected is embedded in the Marine Corps' operating ethos and its successful innovations over the past eighty years (amphibious assault, maneuver warfare, counterinsurgency) underscore its adaptability.

The Marine Corps most recently demonstrated its adaptability very early in Operation Enduring Freedom (OEF), establishing Forward Operating Base Rhino in Afghanistan, where the unprecedented expeditionary success (450 miles from sea on very short notice) enabled the introduction of follow on land forces. During Operation Iraqi Freedom (OIF), the Marine deployment held the line in Al Anbar Province, setting the stage for the U.S. military's successful implementation of counterinsurgency doctrine, developed on the basis of lessons learned and the intellectual leadership of US Marine Corps General James Mattis. The latter was the product of collaboration with the Army, in particular US Army General David Petraeus, but USMC innovations on irregular warfare in advance of the other services should be recognized.

Instead of accommodating the recurring depiction of the Marines as a second land Army, wouldn't it be more appropriate to ask whether the Army has become a second Marine Corps?

Acknowledged – the U.S. Army is the nation's principal land force and complements the ground combat capabilities resident in the Corps. Both services emphasize initiative, unit cohesion, and maneuver warfare, but the Army has simply demonstrated less adaptability.

The Army readily recognizes the salient challenges arising from uncertainty, but its institutional biases led the [service to conclude](#) its requisite capabilities should be combined arms maneuver as well as wide area security. The latter entails activities to consolidate gains, stabilize environments, and ensure freedom of movement and action, e.g. occupation. Unfortunately, the

Army has recognized this only after its middling performance in Iraq, where the failure to undertake counterinsurgency operations (i.e. small wars) permitted the deterioration of conditions witnessed in 2006. General Petraeus spearheaded the doctrinal shift, but the lessons learned only came at great expense in American blood and treasure.

Going forward, the Army will indeed be more effective at wide area security, but the question is will the nation accept a comparable mission (at comparable cost) anytime soon.

To again reference the 2010 Marine Corps Operating Concepts, the service does not view a given mission from the perspective of a particular tool set or domain, but instead considers an adversary holistically and figure out “how to get at him” in creative ways that emphasizes the development of unique technologies, methods, and organizations suited to the trans-domain edge.²

The Marine Corps' principal construct for a mission, the Marine Air Ground Task Force (MAGTF), is composed of ground, air, and logistical combat elements, is fully integrated with the U.S. naval forces and, equally important, is scalable to a Marine Expeditionary Unit (MEU) or Brigade (MEB), depending on the contingency. Organic MAGTF capabilities entail an operating radii of 165 nautical miles as a battalion all the way up to 365 nautical miles as a MEB, as well as optimization for urban environments.

Finally, the Corps executes its mission frugally; the Corps constitutes 17 percent of the military's active ground combat maneuver units, 12 percent of the fixed wing tactical aircraft, and 19 percent of the attack helicopter, but consumes only 6.5 percent of the baseline defense budget.

The MAGTF emerges as the template for the American military required for the future – a joint strike force comprised of numbered expeditionary combined air-ground units.

If national leadership cannot undertake, much less propose, substantive trade-offs among the three military departments, then perhaps this alternative configuration could be established.

Furthermore, instead of choosing which of the three battlespaces (land, sea, air) will receive lower priority, perhaps the leadership could choose which numbered joint expeditionary unit would receive lower priority, in line with given regional security considerations.

U.S. Joint Forces Command as Template

Unfortunately, current national strategy does not clearly identify what the nation's principal objective(s) will be. The [Obama Administration's objectives](#) – sustaining American global leadership – are, as with preceding administration submissions, just aspirations, with no explanation as to identifying how national resources will be committed and expended.

The Department of Defense's most recent contribution to national security guidance, the [2010 Quadrennial Defense Review](#) (QDR) Report, names four general priorities – prevail in

² Interestingly, it will be the Marines [who will first introduce heavy armor](#) into Afghanistan.

today's wars, prevent and deter conflict, prepare to defeat adversaries and succeed in a wide range of contingencies, and preserve and enhance the All-Volunteer Force. Each is an appropriate objective (especially the first), but the quadrennial defense review is expected to identify the defense strategy *and program for the next 20 years*. As the nation begins coping with the enormity of its fiscal challenges, the "[absence of strategic choice](#)" is a unacceptable shortcoming.

A concise statement of national strategic interests was provided by the recently concluded Perry-Hadley Commission, which conducted an "[independent](#)" quadrennial defense review. According to the commission, America's "enduring security interests" are 1) defending the American homeland, 2) assuring access to the sea, air, space, and cyberspace, 3) preserving a favorable balance of power in Eurasia (in favor of democracy) and 4) providing for the global common good through such actions as humanitarian aid, development assistance, and disaster relief.

The order in which the commission listed these interests (purposely or not) provides the basis for addressing the department's other principal legacy structure – the [Unified Command Plan](#) (UCP) -- which corresponds to overseas challenges as the United States has encountered them since 1945, not as how they are emerging in the present day.

To assure access to the global commons and to prevent the rise of an anti-America regional hegemon on the Eurasian landmass, the existing UCP is an impediment. The fact that DOD has established only two new geographic combatant commands (Northern and African) versus four functional counterparts – Special Operations, Strategic, Transportation, and Joint Forces) – since Goldwater-Nichols is telling.

Moreover, when the United States launched the global war on terrorism, then Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld named Special Operations Command (SOCOM) as the lead combatant command, meaning all other geographic combatant commands would support SOCOM directed counter-terrorist operations globally. Prior to the assignment, SOCOM was typically a supporting command; the decision underscored the need to transcend arbitrary lines on a map. By the same token, Transportation Command has emerged as a critical entity, identifying key nodes in global en route infrastructure and managing global supply chains (across all modes within the "global commons") in support of operations in Iraq and Afghanistan, an extremely challenging activity, especially in the latter given the austere environment and dearth of indigenous infrastructure.

Joint Forces Command (JFCOM) was established in 1999 to examine and test operational concepts, doctrinal innovations under realistic conditions.³ In May 2005, Secretary Rumsfeld

³ The command's history with experimentation was abbreviated when the global war on terrorism necessitated greater attention on irregular warfare. Furthermore, JFCOM experienced a setback when Israel was defeated by Hezbollah in 2006; Israel had employed an operational concept closely related to JFCOM's concept of operations, heavily premised on the use of precision weaponry to create favorable "effects". The setback led JFCOM to abandon effects-based operational concepts and begin the long exploration for alternatives. In 2009, Dr. Andrew Krepinevich, a member of the 1997 panel, published [7 Deadly Scenarios](#), in which he argued for revitalizing JFCOM. Dr. Krepinevich recommended extending the JFCOM commander's tenure; requiring at least one major joint field exercise a year; establishing a standing joint opposing force at each training center; and granting JFCOM major force program (MFP) budget authority.

approved a new force allocation approach, whereby JFCOM became responsible for developing global, joint sourcing solutions for conventional forces in support of combatant commander requirements.

The abundance of flag officer-led commands provides a tempting target in a time of lean budgets, but the decision to eliminate Joint Forces Command, operating at an annual cost less than four Joint Strike Fighters, the entity responsible for creating a joint force, and a key stakeholder to decisions concerning global force deployments, is misguided.

The department should instead retain Joint Forces Command as the entity responsible for experimentation and global power projection and eliminate the geographic combatant commands save for one – a successor Americas Command encompassing the United States and its two contiguous neighbors, Canada and Mexico.

Americas Command would be responsible for continental defense of the United States (and the Title X obligations to man, train, and equip, for all numbered joint expeditionary units within the United States and around the globe). Canada is the largest U.S. trading [partner](#); Mexico is the third largest and is coping with a vicious insurgency rapidly growing in severity. An Americas Command would facilitate the synchronization of multiple security issues among the three countries.

The deployment, stationing, and sustainment of all numbered joint expeditionary units overseas would be the responsibility of Joint Forces Command.

Cut the Nth Joint Expeditionary Unit Instead

As stated above, the principal shortcoming of Gates's efficiencies initiatives is seeking its implementation within existing military service and combatant command structures.

Military services are preoccupied with attaining resources to cover Title X obligations over a three to five year time horizon; the combatant commands are focused on their assigned missions for the next one to two year period. The tension between resources and mission results in compromises satisfying all bureaucratic stakeholders at the expense of departmental capacity to establish priorities in accordance with national objectives.

Ideally, defense leadership should be focusing on the requirements of the total force and the extent to which a portion of the total force would be deployed overseas. Instead of haggling with the military departments and combatant commands for changes at the margin and accepting risk in one region because of the purported need to hedge in a competing battlespace domain or region, leadership should be deciding to expand or eliminate the Nth numbered joint expeditionary unit, at home or abroad.

By replacing service-centric force structures with joint expeditionary units, the department will have greater latitude in ensuring resources are allocated to benefit the total force, not just the latest victor in the perennial inter-service rivalry. The new force structure would make jointness inherent to requirement generation with corresponding effects on equipping and training.

By streamlining the Unified Command Plan with one geographic and one functional command, the department will have greater flexibility in determining where the total force will be deployed in response to prevailing threats, not challenges from decades ago. The new combatant command structure would focus future planning around global missions.

Overall, rationalization of force structure and command structure would eliminate the competition between resource and mission advocates and instead provide the department with an opportunity to align resources and missions.

Beyond Homeland Defense

If, going forward, the United States accepts the proposition of such a strike force and emphasizes defense of the global commons and preserving a favorable balance in Eurasia, then American forces should be based principally at home, pre-positioned from the sea, forward deployed only at key nodes, and operationally deployed only to counter anti-American balancing.

As the [Eurasian coastline](#) measures approximately 209,000 miles long, identifying appropriate nodes is critical.

Where the department has been devoting resources can be one determinant.

A review of [departmental budget requests from 2006 to 2011](#) shows a sharp increase in requested military construction funding for projects in the Pacific and Central Command areas of responsibility. In budgets following the Bush Administration's announced intent to shift overseas presence from Europe to Asia, requested annual appropriations for the Pacific Command area rose from \$441M to \$1.8B; in the Central Command area, for the same period, the amounts requested rose from \$135M to \$3.1B, and this excludes military construction funding in Afghanistan and Iraq for the same period. Finally, a review of [overseas costs](#) (inclusive of military construction, operations and maintenance, and military personnel) between 2008 and 2010 indicates the European Command continues to consume the vast bulk of funding; whether Europe requires such an extensive investment is addressed below.

Where the department has been deploying forces can be a second determinant.

An initiative within the Office of Secretary of Defense (led principally by Dr. Thomas Barnett) completed this same exercise in the early 2000s and mapped the variety of military responses since the end of the Cold War. Placing a line around all of these interventions, Dr. Barnett demonstrated how each military response corresponded with countries coping with transitions to an international political economy. These countries' encounters with the global economy met variously with political opposition, economic backwardness, or cultural resistance and sparked a crisis requiring American military intervention. The rejection of modernity by Islamic extremism in Southwest Asia is the most violent example.

The similarity between the map of interventions since the end of the Cold War and the locus of future security challenges (megacities along the littorals) described by the JOE 2010 is not a

coincidence – they are premised on the same principle of instability borne of geographies and peoples navigating complicated political and economic transitions. See the [Barnett map versus the JOE 2010 map](#).

A preliminary conclusion arising from this review is the diminishing need for the United States to maintain its substantial presence in Europe and to shift it to Asia. Since 1991, American military interventions in Europe have been far less frequent or extensive as those elsewhere. Moreover, Europe has essentially “debellicized.” America's closest ally, the United Kingdom, is proposing substantial reductions in forces and power projection capabilities to cope with a fiscal crisis. European forces are deployed in support of American forces deployed to Afghanistan, but “national caveats” essentially restrict them from participating in combat operations.

In contrast, Asia is [witnessing increasing](#) national defense budgets and large arms purchases. As Europe stands down, Asia stands up.

However, for some, the exclusion of the People's Republic of China (PRC) as a potential security challenge is a significant shortcoming of the Barnett map.

Dr. Barnett left the PRC out of his map because, from his perspective, the PRC leadership is principally focused on securing its own position, which it accomplishes by improving the welfare of its population, an enormous undertaking in its own right. The PRC's corresponding stridency on the world stage (primarily in defense of its regional and commercial) interests is only natural but hardly indicative of hegemonic aspirations.

In contrast, numerous observers allege the PRC's tremendous economic has permitted the authoritarian leadership to dedicate more and more resources to modernizing its military, in particular its naval, air defense, and ballistic missile capabilities – critical components in anti-access and area denial tactics generically described by the 2010 JOE. Moreover, the PRC leadership's lack of transparency further obscures its intentions.

Regardless of intentions, PRC capabilities are limited at present. Moreover, opposing perspectives can, at a minimum, agree the leadership is indeed focused on preserving itself and its current security interests are modest – the integrity of the immediate coastline and the near Western Pacific. Disrupting access to the global economy or devastating Taiwan, home to a modern economy and the source of substantial investment in the mainland, would only harm PRC interests and risk devastating retaliation from the United States.

The United States should be calibrating its response accordingly. American naval assets should remain forward deployed, but changing the existing American ground force presence has been difficult enough without having to countenance an expanded presence. (Fortunately, the PRC has been clumsily aggressive enough on its own as of late. Instead of America having to explore new security relationships in the region, recent Chinese posturing has prompted numerous Asian nations to seek deeper relationships as a counter.)

Going forward, preserving access to the global commons should guide the scope of American presence. Until capabilities are developed to counter anti-access and area denial tactics,

American forces should be reduced and consolidated at key nodes ([e.g. southern South Korea, Singapore, Diego Garcia, Horn of Africa](#)) to enhance coverage of major maritime trade routes along the Eurasian coastline and enable pre-positioning for littoral contingencies in the Indian Ocean.

In light of the anti-access and area denial challenge, asking whether a strike-oriented force could secure American interests against an adversary like the PRC (a sovereign state with modern military capabilities, the peer competitor in 2010 JOE parlance) is appropriate. The response is yes because sharpening American strike capabilities will still serve as a deterrent to PRC ambitions and would still provide effective retaliation in the event of any overly aggressive action.

Proposing a strike force composed of combined air-ground combat elements does not entail forgoing the exploration of concepts and capabilities to address anti-access and area denial tactics. Indeed, the current effort to devise an [AirSea Battle Concept](#) is a commendable effort to integrate the naval and air services' concepts of operations and capabilities in the face of anti-access and area denial tactics, but ground combat elements will be integral to achieving whatever objective for which America has launched long-range air and sea-based strikes.

The proposition of joint expeditionary units is meant to supersede the encumbrances raised by service departments and include all elements in such endeavors.

Beyond Efficiencies

More broadly, proposing a strike force and a revised global presence is not solely about departmental efficiency or committing the American military to missions revolving around littoral operations or fighting small wars.

The concept is also meant to elevate the Corps' institutional philosophy that acknowledges the American warfighter cannot predict with certainty the pattern of war, and that, more pointedly, in the face of such uncertainty, “the ultimate determination in war is the man on the scene with the gun.”

War remains bending an adversary to your will and entails the exercise of violent force; fashioning a strike force in line with this perspective should provide a floor and ceiling for American strategy.

To be direct, American forces should not be conducting long duration counterinsurgency, security, or stability operations.

Counterinsurgency proponents have made lucid arguments as to the importance of this doctrine, but accepting the obligation to engage insurgents and secure the local population as a corollary to every American military intervention is needless.

First, security and stability operations could come at the expense of combat capabilities. The risk is acknowledged by the Capstone Concept – “the attention paid to training for irregular

adversaries could also come at the expense of sustaining combat capabilities, specifically those with respect to regular forces.”

Second, insurgencies know they only have to outlast the United States and win by not losing. The insurgents' goal is cost-imposition and the experience in Iraq and Afghanistan underscore the cost in both American treasure and blood; *indeed, it is the tremendous expense in the former that has partly brought the nation to this juncture.*

Shifting to a strike force turns cost-imposition on the enemy; with greater proficiency at strike, adversaries will know they are vulnerable to American retaliation.

As laid out in the exceptional *Armed Forces Journal* article, "[An Alternative To COIN](#)," America should practice "repetitive raiding," whereby the military leverages a very well demonstrated aptitude for destroying the enemy, iteratively if necessary. Instead of expending valuable time and treasure for marginal gains -- the price incurred by counterinsurgency operations -- the American military should continue limiting major operations to the rapid destruction of enemies and returning should the enemy reconstitute. Embracing repetitive raiding [means](#) never having to own it after breaking it.

By renouncing the intent to conduct comprehensive security operations, America will signal would be adversaries that the nation understands war is about upholding the national interest, having realistic expectations, ensuring sufficient means are employed, and to successfully wage war means capitalizing on its demonstrated capabilities.

Read more by Robert Jordan Prescott at [House of Marathon](#).

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